Art Education and The Promotion of Intercultural Understanding*

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The arts and man, published by UNESCO twenty years ago, (UNESCO, 1969) contained statements such as:

> "Art increases our state of aliveness by expanding and deepening our state of awareness."
> "Art makes leisure time and all time a thing of interest and beauty."
> "Art gives voice to self."
> "Record making in the natural and personal symbols of art enables children to record the uniqueness and significance of their lives."

Although they may quibble with one or two words, most art educators would accept these statements but they may not be so good at helping their students see that *all* people use art for some of these reasons; that there is no culture without some form of artistic production. Because the arts are universal as well as ethnocentric and culture-bound it is natural that learning about art be conceived as *one* way to promote intercultural understanding.

The International Baccalaureate, a program for the final two years of secondary school which operates in sixty-five countries requires all students to follow a course in the theory of knowledge where questions such as the following are considered:

> What is aesthetic judgement and what is its sphere?
> Are all humans equally competent judges in the sphere of the arts?
> Is beauty/artistic significance entirely in the eye of the beholder?
> Are there rational ways of deciding on the merits of personal taste?
> How can we settle our differences in aesthetic judgements? Head-counting, the consensus of experts, computers, experience and personal judgement requiring detachment?
> What is the influence of tradition, ideology, religion and morality on our capacity for perception of artistic merit?
> Are the arts progressive? Is new necessarily better? Do the arts and literature matter or are they merely occupational pastimes? If they have a significant role in human lives, to what extent is some social and political control of the creation and of the consumption of artistic work inevitable? What does art for art's sake mean? Is it possible that artists are not fully aware of the meaning of their works? Is it useful to view art as a language? How is it that people seem able to enjoy and appreciate art from different cultures (Street, 1988, pp.9-10)?

These are important questions, but they are questions that have all too frequently been answered from a limited cultural perspective. This paper will consider some of these questions and their implications for international, intercultural art education. Let me begin with a quote from one of Canada's great painters. Arthur Lismer (Bridges, 1977), a member of the "Group of Seven," said that

> Art is like this — it is experience, lived and shared with others. It is the living sinew that binds humans together everywhere; for no nation, no child, no person is without it (p.85).

I think that Lismer's statement is true but I don't think that we have done nearly enough to promote art and art education as a unifying element in a world fraught with division and rich cultural diversity. Art learning must go beyond techniques, tools, and materials. Art must be seen as a powerful force in shaping our vision of the world. Through art we can understand each other's vision and keep our own alive.

But why should an artist and art educator be especially interested in problems of intercultural understanding? Why should a person concerned with internationalism and cultural pluralism in schools and other educational agencies be especially concerned with art? Do the arts, artists, and performers have a *special* role in intercultural understanding? I believe, along with June McFee (1974) that:

> Material culture is mainly art. It is the objective expression of people's concepts of reality, the nature of social roles, a feedback system that helps keep social organizations going. It is a communication system, that tells large numbers of people ... what, where, and how social action and interaction takes place (p.10).

As an art educator I work in two contexts: the local and the international. Locally I am part of a multi-cultural community. Vancouver is a Pacific Rim city with, in addition to Europeans of various extractions, an increasing Asian population. There is also an indigenous native population as well as visible minorities form Central and South America and other places. Canada is officially bilingual and multicultural. Internationally, in addition to currently being a vice-president of the International Society for Education through Art, I serve as Chief Examiner in Art/Design and Coordinator for all of the Arts for the International Baccalaureate Organization. Stressing

internationalism and cultural pluralism, the International Baccalaureate is a high school graduation qualification that began in Geneva and has spread to sixty-five countries around the world. Whether working locally or internationally I think that it is necessary to begin with four premises: one about the arts and their function and role in society, and three about culture.

Premise #1: *The arts are agents for the transmission of culture and are, or should be, an important part of everyone's life.* It is important to stress that appreciating form is not the same thing as understanding art. This is a distinction that we don't sufficiently make in art education. It seems to make little sense to teach a person to "appreciate" or make art, perform music, write or perform for the theater, to study art's history, or even to talk about the arts, if that person is not also helped to see that the arts can relate to various social orders in a causal, functional, and contextual manner. In other words it is important to understand the anthropology and sociology of art.

Given this contextual view of art, we need to embrace the following three premises: (1) *That cultural pluralism is a reality and that grudging or tacit recognition must be replaced by genuine acceptance* (2) *that no racial, cultural, or national group is superior to another,* and (3) *that equality of opportunity is a right that must be enjoyed by every student regardless of ethnic, cultural, or national background.* We all need and use art for rather similar reasons. In this sense (and if we are not to be culture-bound and elitist it is the only sense that makes any sense), African art is as "valid" as European art, popular art as "high" art, etc. This does not mean that there is not good and bad African art, good and bad European art, good and bad popular art, etc.

No-one must think of themselves as more civilized than others. The International Baccalaureate students that I currently deal with represent about one hundred and twenty-two different nationalities. They are legatees of vast and complex cultural heritages in which a great variety of strands are interwoven: scientific, technological, religious, moral, political, and, of course, artistic. But we do discriminate and think of ourselves as superior to others. For example, if we look at the tables of contents in many general art history texts published in Europe or North America we will likely find something similar to that in a book that H.W. Janson or his publishers had the gall to title, *A basic history of art* and advertise as "introducing the vast world of art at a level students can understand" (Janson,1981). Native Indian, Inuit, and African art are given minimal mention under the title "primitive art"; East Indian art is not included, and in the basic edition Oriental art doesn't even get an ethnocentric mention as an influence on Western Impressionism, let alone in its own right.

Art teachers in schools are not exempt from the sins of stereotyping and cultural bias. Teachers must examine their own biases where these exist, and must face them squarely, realizing that as we approach the twenty-first century in order to deal with students of national and ethnic backgrounds and cultural experience different from theirs, preconceived nations of ethnic and/or social categories could aggravate rather than alleviate problems. I think that one of the ways in which we stop art from being a vital experience in the in-school lives of students is by the aesthetic standards that we often hawk in the classroom. An American art educator (Schellin, 1973) has something to say about this:

> What we tell students when we eagerly expose them to paintings by "great artists" is that we, the artists and the patrons of the artists, may be superior to the students and their parents. They are "culturally deprived" while we are "culturally enlightened." What we may tell a black student, a Chicano student or a Native American student when we [constantly] show them European art objects is that there might be something "wrong" with or "primitive" about being non-white. We may debase any student as a human being, whether he or she is white or non-white, if we insult the student's or his [/her] parent's latest prize possession as some *thing* which has no redeeming "aesthetic worth" according to the culturally defined aesthetic standard we "hawk" in the classroom (pp.7-8).

We are often elitist. We cannot afford to be.

We have to realize that as educators committed to cultural pluralism we could be more democratic if we were to look at the ways the arts are used to strengthen social bonds and to reach out to others for mutuality, to say "we belong" in a *variety* of contexts. It is sad, for example, when groups of North American young people regard rock videos as the only art form worth associating with, or when visual art educators ally themselves exclusively with Western museum traditions of connoisseurship, because they are less likely to be interested in and tolerant of other art forms which also have much deep meaning for the people who support them. This need not be the case. Gaining knowledge about variety, place, and role of the arts in social life is important if we wish to increase intercultural understanding, because in its diversity we can see the common functions belonging to art — what we might call the *why* aspects. We tend to pay too much attention to the *what* and our own cultural preferences tend to restrict the universality of our approach. If we are truly interested in intercultural understanding then we must study the arts as social institutions influencing and being influenced by the worlds of which they are a part.

In expanding our notion of what the arts are, many examples need to be considered, not just those that we find in galleries and museums, concert halls and theaters. The popular, vernacular, and folk arts are also important and significant. In the visual arts, we need to take into account architecture and the built environment, interior design and decoration, clothing and body ornamentation, images on living room and bedroom walls, posters, video, comic books, and passing fads such as T-shirts and skateboards. We need to concern ourselves with what students themselves define as "art." One teacher in Vancouver, B.C. asked the twelve-year-olds in her class to pick one object at home that was either hanging on the wall or that was displayed like "art." The class identified: a pottery rabbit; teddy bears; doodle art; animals from rocks; a 1920's *Vanity* cover; pictures of dogs, cats, and a monkey; pictures of hockey teams; bike posters; posters of John Stamos, Matt Dillon, Tom Cruise, Rob Lowe, Billy Idol, Duran Duran, Clash, Cindy Lauper; string pictures; photographs; a charging bull poster;

a landscape painting; small figurines; an oil painting of a mountain, stream, and trees; drawings done by a student of a fawn and a cat's face; a print from Hong Kong; a wood carving of a polar bear; a brass sculpture of a horse; a black velvet painting of a dog and a cat; pictures of Paris; Hoffman's "Image of Christ;" a cross on the wall; a statue of the Virgin Mary; Hummel gifts; a black light poster; trophies and pennants; a watercolor of flowers done by a student's sister, etc. From this beginning students were led to a consideration of the wider world of art and the place of art in their lives and the lives of other people. Their list of art-like objects reminds us that we all, students included, experience art every day, and that significant art is not necessarily the same as "great" art. By understanding the student's own, often culture-bound conception of the arts, the teacher is able to use the involvement that the student has already established with the arts, as a path toward further understanding and knowledge.

Adrian Gerbrands (1957), a Dutch anthropologist who has worked extensively in Africa states that the arts are essentially for three reasons: to perpetuate, change, and enhance culture. He has shown that the arts have a function transmitting, sustaining, and changing culture as well as in decorating and enhancing the environment. He has shown that the arts directly and indirectly, may bolster the morale of groups to create unity and social solidarity and also may create awareness of social issues and lead to social change. The arts, he found, may serve as an aid in identifying social position and can be considered as commodities that may increase the power and prestige of the participant and owner. The arts may express and reflect religious, political, economic, technological, leisure, and play aspects of culture. At times the artist was found to be a magician, teacher, mythmaker, sociotherapist, interpreter, enhancer and decorator, ascriber of status, propagandist, and catalyst of social change. In a culture the predominance of any aspect and the role of the artist or performer are conditioned by the particular values of that culture. There is no culture without some form of artistic expression and communication.

If society is concerned with transmission, conservation, and extension of cultural values, we cannot ignore the arts - because art is a medium that transmits the cultural heritage, maintains certain cultural values, and indirectly effects change. Bruce Archer (1978) has written that:

> The reasons why the arts are so important in the achievement of cultural diversity is that they are themselves essentially wholistic, anthropocentric, and value laden. They are the media for the doing, the making and the living of a culture (p.8).

If art making and performing are the media for "the doing, the making and the living of a culture" it is reasonable to assume that cultural *understanding* could be one of the most important reasons for learning about the arts. Dorothy Lee (1959) has stated:

> My own culture with its laws of logic, its principles of cognition, its rigidly defined limits of validation, offers me a strongly precategorized view of reality . .When I study other cultures I find a different codification, I get a different glimpse of reality, from a different starting point. I find other, equally self- consistent systems of symbolization ... Thus I am enabled to some extent to go beyond my own finite view: I am enabled to see my culture as one of many possible systems of relating the self to the universe . . .(p.2).

For some time I have felt, that as art educators, we should look to the social sciences as well as the humanities to see what is being said about aesthetic experience and the arts in those disciplines. As a beginning I found it instructive to seek out the required texts being used in introductory anthropology and sociology classes at the University of British Columbia. In the anthropology text I found a valid attack on our ethnocentrism, e.g.:

> Obviously, all music, all science, all history, all food is ethnic, in the sense that it is linked with an ethnic group. The hamburger and milk-shake at the drive-in restaurant are [really] no less ethnic than the sweet-and-sour pork at the Chinese restaurant. If the Yoruba wood carver working on a mask for the next Gelede festival is doing ethnic art, so was Michelangelo when he painted the Sistine Chapel. If we must call the medicine practitioner among the Navaho a witch doctor, then we should extend the courtesy to the Harley Street gynecologist or the Massachusetts General Hospital brain surgeon. There is no universally valid criterion whereby our view of the world should be called science, and everybody else's "ethnoscience" or "folk systems." The prefix "ethno," as it is commonly used in anthropology, is not only a redundancy, but an invidious one. What is true of science is equally true of art.... What is untenable... is the notion that complex societies have artists producing "great art," while simpler societies only have artisans producing "tribal art" or "folk art." Western ethnocentrism in art is ... deeply ingrained in our culture (Van den Berghe, 1975, pp.220-221).

In the sociology text I found a discussion of artistic expression as a way of communicating via a *code*. Code making and understanding were presented as human activities that develop naturally *in the context of social experience*, e.g.:

> All art is social experience. This may sound like a strange statement, because after all one can listen to records or paint a landscape when one is entirely alone.... Nevertheless all art is made by human beings. Art is a symbolic activity, a way of communicating an inner experience. It is obvious that one must learn to paint and that learning is a social experience. But it may not be so obvious that one must also learn to *see* paintings and to hear music. Of

> course all of us can focus our eyes on a picture, but we may not get much out of it... Every artist creates or performs for some audience. In some preindustrial societies every adult is probably able to understand and appreciate all the art that is produced in that society. Wherever culture is uniform the same artistic codes are shared by all the members of the society. However, our society is characterized by *cultural pluralism*, in which a number of different codes are used by different artists (Spencer, 1979, p.59).

This has some important implications for art education and I think that we art educators might provide more significant programs if we made art education a bit more like social studies education — at least for part of our program. We might focus on artists and their socialization, publics and audiences, culturally specific values and broad cultural themes, or the changing conditions that in various ways support or influence forms of artistic expression.

Our problem has been that experience in making and performing certain types of art has led to limited knowledge about the function and role of the arts in society. In considering the arts as social studies we would focus on the "why" aspects of art. Students would integrate knowledge about the function and role of the arts in society with experience in making and performing culturally relevant art. The student would also study artists working in a variety of codes who, through their work, have been cultural maintainers, social therapists, propagandists and catalysts of social change, mythmakers, magicians, enhancers and decorators. Students would use their own art for these same purposes and would seek to answer such questions as: How do we identify "the art that matters" in a given society? How are the arts used by this particular group? How does art educate and socialize? How does the artist or performer structure both what is said and how it is said? How do we learn the code? What is the role and influence of the artist? How are the arts, economy, and social organization related? Can we sift out (from many codes) the pioneering historically significant artists, performers, and works of art as well as identify periods and specific trends?

This, of course, is all a far cry from some conceptions of arts education which tend to assume that art education is fundamentally a mode of self expression, that so-called "pure" aesthetic relationships are of primary importance, that "making" art transcends the activity of mind (which as American art educator Edmund Feldman has said suggests that it is thus ideal for occupying the "mindless"), and that the mastery of performance skills automatically advances the goals of general education!

Although it has been thought difficult to define the arts we can begin to see how important the arts are if we try to imagine a world without them. Can we, or our students, visualize a world without singing or music, with no dancing, no plays or stories, no movies, no sculpture, no architecture, no paintings, no drawings, and no design or decoration in the things we use in everyday life? I submit that many students could happily very well live their lives without the sort of art that some teachers typically promote. Art, as some define it, is seen as a peripheral phenomenon in culture, no longer important to the public at large, but only to artists and their specialized public. A pluralist, inter-cultural perspective should contradict this view by helping us realize that here are many different types of art and no such thing as "art in itself." Toni Flores Fratto (1978), a social scientist who writes extensively on the arts, states bluntly:

> The fact is, there is no such thing as art. That is, there is no such thing as art in itself. Art in itself is not a universal human phenomenon, but a synthetic Western category, and a relatively recent one at that. The concept has generated endlessly misleading ethnography, art history and [a]esthetic theory, and has acted mainly to mystify the social conditions which keep acts of creation and sensual pleasure out of the experience of the socially exploited majority (pp.135-136).

The concept has also generated much misleading art educational theory. "Love" for art is all too frequently believed to be independent and free. In North America, as Vesta Daniel said at a recent art education conference in Nigeria, we have not sufficiently acknowledged Western "high art" bias, patrician sensibilities, elitism, social status, affluence, and pretension for what they are. Too often we have assumed that either (1) art education isn't important, or, (2) art education means enlarging, around the world, the public capable of "appreciating" those sorts of art forms that are identified with Western "big C" Culture. What we have to recognize, as Janet Wolff (1983), a sociologist of art does, is that "traditional" aesthetics which tries to identify universal characteristics of art turns out to be "nothing more than the values of a particular dominant, or strategically located group in society, able to project these as absolute and impartial" (p.107). We must not fall into this trap. We must help our students to see what one writer (Karbusicky, 1968) would call the gnoseological (functioning to give a knowledge of the spiritual), hedonistic, and recreational functions of art in many different cultures and subcultures. These are similar to some of the functions for art that Gerbrands (1957) found in Africa, e.g.: religious belief, social status, political, economic, technological, enhancement, leisure and play. The arts need to be seen as systems of signification. We have to show our students that an individual artist may play much less of a part in producing art than our view of the artist as some sort of genius, supposedly working with some sort of divine inspiration, typically leads us to believe. We have to help our students see that the arts encode many values and ideologies and are rarely innocent of political and ideological processes. We need to become familiar with the notion of *Rezeptionasthetik*, and that the meaning of a work depends on the expectations against which it is received and which also pose the questions which the work must answer. These expectations are called "horizons", which are characterized as the product of the discourses of a culture. As one author (Culler, 1981) states: "Rezeptionasthetik is not a way of interpreting works but an attempt to understand their changing intelligibility by identifying the codes and interpretive assumptions that give them meaning for different audiences [in different places and] at different periods" (p.13). Such a

notion has many implications for the ways in which art should be taught — particularly for intercultural understanding.

Of course it is important that our students have an opportunity to behave as artists, but it is also important that our students see and respect the arts as being used to give voice to ideas, values, and perspectives that have particular meanings in particular contexts. The arts can be at the center of a curriculum designed to foster a pluralist and intercultural view of the world. The arts are perhaps the most ethnocentric creations of humankind. Nothing else would seem to have as much to do with group and individual values as do the arts. Thus, when the arts could be a central and real focus for, say, a social studies program, it is disturbing that the only art in social studies is often confined to illustrating notebooks and making fancy headings. Similarly the usual trite experiences of making Inuit igloos from sugar cubes and North West Coast totems from toilet rolls are hardly substitutes for looking at art as a real social study!

Art is a basic social institution in all cultures. We need curricula that stress the *why* of art and that give attention to the popular and folk arts of many cultures and subcultures if our students are to see art as a really important part of cultural life. Art educators must teach the social foundations of art and make every effort to develop the conception of art as a basic human activity, by showing its function, use, and necessity (both aesthetic and non-aesthetic) in the conduct of human affairs.

How then do we do this? As I have already stated, my answer is to deal with the *why* of art. All cultures have some form of art. All cultures use art for rather similar reasons: to give a presence to the "gods," and thus, in some way to objectify feeling; to support and to challenge certain cultural values; and for decoration and enhancement. If we understand *why* a group needs art, and then look at what the resources available to the group are, it does not become too difficult to accept the form of the art object or event, whether it be a raku pot, a delicately decorated Ukrainian Easter egg, a Northwest coast totem pole, a tinseled Shikh shrine, a painting on black velvet, a provocatively decorated panel van, spontaneous graffiti on an inner city wall, or unfamiliar songs, dances, and theater. As art educators, surely that is one of our main functions, to teach about the why of art — of *real* art — the sort of art that kicks and screams in all areas and strata of society, not just the art that is currently found in galleries and museums and that is promoted by the elite few.

The comparative study of art, of response to art, and the production of art forms which *matter* can help us to understand each other. Art has always been a powerful force in shaping our vision of the world. We need to understand each other's vision and keep our own alive. We need to combat any art-for-art's-sake attitudes that may be entrenched in schools because it is a rather peculiar notion of art and one that deters a full understanding of the role of art in a variety of contexts and cultures. In contrast, art educators who view art as a process of human action and interaction and who do not confine their attention to limited artistic products will be able to give our subject greater cultural impact and meaning.

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